

JUSTIN WHITMEL EARLEY

THE
COMMON
RULE *Youth Edition*



GROWING YOUR FAITH
IN A DISTRACTED WORLD

YOUNG READERS EDITION



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CONTENTS

PART ONE: DISCOVERING THE POWER OF HABIT

When Habits Go Wrong	3
What Is a Habit?	9
Jesus as the Good Master	19

PART TWO: HOW TO PRACTICE THE COMMON RULE

The Eight Habits of the Common Rule	29
Time to Practice the Common Rule	37

PART THREE: DAILY AND WEEKLY HABITS

Daily Habit 1	
Kneeling Prayer at Morning, Midday, and Bedtime	45
Daily Habit 2	
One Meal with Others	59
Daily Habit 3	
One Hour with Phone Off	71
Daily Habit 4	
Scripture Before Phone	85
Weekly Habit 1	
One Hour of Conversation with a Friend	101
Weekly Habit 2	
Four Hours of Physical Activity	119
Weekly Habit 3	
Fast from Something for Twenty-Four Hours	133
Weekly Habit 4	
Sabbath Rest	149



Conclusion

The Rule of Failure

165

EXTRAS

The Common Rule for Youth Groups

173

Notes

175

PART ONE

DISCOVERING
THE POWER
OF HABIT



WHEN HABITS GO WRONG

It was midnight on an ordinary Saturday night when I woke in a dreadful panic. Sweating and shaking, I sat up in bed. The feeling was so intense I expected to find something terrible had happened. But all was quiet.

I woke up my wife and tried to explain what I was feeling. It was like my heart had rung the alarm bells for no reason. Finally, after calming down, I fell back asleep.

The next night, the same thing happened. Only this time, I couldn't fall back asleep. The next day, I was a zombie. Fear worked through me like a virus. I dreaded the moment that night when I would have to lie back down with my panicked thoughts.

Sure enough, that night it happened again. Which is why I ended up in the emergency room at three in the morning. The doctor told me nothing was wrong, that I was just showing symptoms of clinical anxiety and panic attacks. He assured me—as if it were comforting—that this was *very*

common. So he gave me a bottle of sleeping pills and told me I needed to slow down.

Of course, I had no idea how to slow down.

EVERYTHING IS FINE

As far as I knew, I wasn't stressed or worried about anything. Everything was fine! After graduating from college, I married my wonderful wife and we moved to China where we served as missionaries for a few years. We would have stayed even longer, except that something very unusual happened.

One day, while out on a walk, in the space of ten minutes I came across a drug dealer, a prostitute, a thief, and a government protestor.

Guess which action stood out the most?

Openly selling drugs on the street. Nope.

Prostitution. Uh-uh.

Getting rid of stolen electronics at bargain prices. Guess again.

All three of these activities were normal in China. I'd seen them hundreds of times, and they were viewed as legitimate ways to make money.

But in the years we'd lived in China, I'd *never* seen a political protest. The consequences for opposing the government are way too high. Yet there she was. I watched as a young woman unfurled a sign that said, "The judicial system in China is broken, the people in the countryside are being oppressed—" I never got to read the rest of the sign because the woman was quickly arrested and taken away.

As I continued my walk, I reflected on the four activities I'd just witnessed. Three would've been considered against

the law in many countries. And only one was a brave act of love for a neighbor. Yet the young woman who stood up for oppressed people was the only one punished. And that didn't sit well with me.

That was the day I realized the power that law and business have to shape the world. And that was also the day I felt the Lord telling me that if I wanted to follow him, I should do it in those arenas. That's where God wanted me to be a missionary, not in China.

I listened to God's call. My wife, Lauren, and I moved to Washington, DC, where I went to Georgetown Law and graduated at the top of my class. Soon we had two sons, and I landed a job as a mergers and acquisitions attorney at the best big law firm in Richmond, Virginia. My family and best friends lived in Richmond, so we moved down there to live happily ever after—or so I thought.

Life was going great.

Well, one thing wasn't great. I was tired. Really tired. In the years after finishing my undergraduate degree at the University of Virginia, I had tackled life with a voracious intensity. I wanted to be good at everything I did. In China, I'd wake up early to study Mandarin and stay up late to hang out with fellow missionaries and Chinese friends.

In law school, my life became an endless series of calendar alerts, appointments, résumé-building activities, and studying late into the night. But every student at Georgetown was like that. Being overwhelmed by ambition was a way of life in law school, so I went along with it. I thought that was how you got to be a top law student, land a big job, and

become a successful lawyer—by saying *yes* to everything and *no* to nothing.

I was too busy, totally overcommitted, and trying to keep up with a chaotic schedule. But I thought I could handle it because I had a calling.

Looking back, I can see how my calling turned into calamity. I intended to tackle injustice and change the world for Jesus. Instead I was the one being changed. My habits looked like everyone else's.

Still, this life was working for me . . . until it wasn't.

THE MISSIONARY GETS CONVERTED

After my late-night trip to the emergency room, I started taking sleeping pills, which began the darkest phase I have ever known. The pills blacked me out for a couple of hours every night, but I soon discovered they came with horrible side effects. Enormous mood swings during the day, hallucinogenic nightmares, even suicidal thoughts—those were all happening to me.

MY HEAD SAID
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This led to a long stretch of time when I needed either pills or alcohol to fall asleep. Eventually I ditched the sleeping pills—thank God—but the drinking remained. And so did a stubborn question: *How does a missionary end up being the one who needs saving?*

Answering this question wasn't easy. I worshiped busyness, accolades, and success. My habits and routines had trained my body to deal with anxiety

and keep going. All the years of a nonstop schedule to earn my place in the world had finally rubbed off on my heart.

My head said one thing—that God loves me no matter what I do. But my habits said another—that I need to keep striving and achieving in order to remain loved.

In the end, my habits wore down my mind, broke down my body, and ate away at my soul. That’s why what happened during the next year of my life was so important.

THINK ABOUT IT . . .

1. Think of an experience—even something you heard, saw, or read—that changed your thinking. What was the experience, and how did your thinking change?

2. After reading about the habits the author developed, do you notice something about your own habits that you hadn’t noticed before? What is it you notice?

3. Rate your busyness on a scale from 1 to 10:



4. This chapter suggests that when your habits (behaviors) go one way but your head (thoughts) goes another, your habits usually win. Like deciding to get up early every day, but having the habit of hitting snooze on your alarm. Have you experienced a time like that?



WHAT IS A HABIT?

When I was young, my mom planted Carolina jasmine in the garden next to our brick garage. Jasmine is beautiful, but it is also a twining vine plant. If not directed, its prolific shoots spread toward other plants, overtaking and eventually killing them.

My mom also built a trellis next to the brick wall. The wooden framework directed the jasmine up and away from the other plants. After a few seasons, yellow blossoms covered the whole wall.

I still remember how that brick turned from something barren to something beautiful. And I still remember the way the fragrance filled the backyard with the thick smell of spring.

Our lives are like a jasmine plant growing on a trellis of habits.

At best, we're made to grow upward, blossom beautifully, and fill the earth with the rich fragrance of God's love and truth. The Bible puts it this way: "Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God" (2 Corinthians 2:15).

At worst, we grow into a twisted jumble. We shoot off sideways in ways we weren't meant to, often snarling into something that hurts us and destroys those around us.

Without a thoughtful framework to guide our growth, we're likely to form habits that are destructive. Building a trellis of healthy habits is a way to acknowledge the good ways God designed us, and the good limits he offers us.

A *habit* is a behavior that occurs automatically, over and over, and often unconsciously. The fact is, we all live according to habits that shape our lives. But we don't often think much about them. A study from Duke University suggests that as much as 40 percent of the actions we take every day are not the products of choices but of habits.¹

Take your daily schedule or your posting on social media. Think about your internet history or how you spent your mornings last weekend. Look at the time you spend with family versus the time you spend looking at a screen during a normal day.

These things define vast portions of our lives. While we would like to think we've carefully chosen these actions, most often we haven't even given them a second thought.

This wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the fact that habits form much more than our schedules—they form our hearts.

In the months after my anxiety crash-landed me in the ER, my wife and I had sketched out a program of habits to get my heart to believe the peace that my head knew but my body refused. I didn't think any of the habits we'd scribbled down were life-changing. There were daily habits of prayer and taking time away from my phone. Weekly habits

included a day of rest and talking more with friends. Nothing mind-blowing.

So my heart was still a twisted mess when I met up with Matt and Steve, my two best friends, at a restaurant to talk to them about these habits. It was a night of good conversation about living with better daily and weekly rhythms. And my friends were going to keep me accountable.

At the time, I hadn't heard of a *keystone habit*—a micro shift that brings about macro effects. I didn't think a few good habit shifts would change my life. But to my surprise, they did.

A HABIT IS A BEHAVIOR THAT OCCURS AUTOMATICALLY, OVER AND OVER, AND OFTEN UNCONSCIOUSLY.

THE SCIENCE OF HABIT

In the book *The Power of Habit*, it says, “When a habit is formed, the brain stops fully participating in decision-making. The patterns we have unfold automatically.”²

In other words, whether we are aware of it or not, we all have habits that shape how we live our lives. And that can be a good thing, because when we act on our habits, it frees up brain space for other thoughts. That's why we can walk between classes and suddenly arrive in our next class without thinking about a single step we've taken. Instead of consciously deciding where to go, we've been talking with a friend or thinking about tonight's game.

Scientifically, habits help our brains to be multi-functional. This is really useful in general, but it has downsides.

And if we're acting out a bad habit—one that reinforces an addiction, perpetuates a harmful pattern of thought, or

encourages mindless submission to technology—we don't have much power to fight back.

Think about your phone. How often do you check it? Research shows the average teen looks at it more than 100 times a day, for over five hours on average. Some check it nearly 500 times a day!³ (Even adults average over three hours a day.) Students use their phone at school and at home. All day. Every day.

There's something unhealthy and maybe even wrong about that. We can tell ourselves over and over that we want to break free from that tiny screen and experience more of real life. But the part of our brain that changes a habit is exactly the part that gets shut out when the autopilot of habit turns on.

When we're on autopilot, our choices—even the unconscious ones—shape us and form us, and we develop patterns that we would never consciously choose.

THE THEOLOGY OF HABIT

This is why to fully understand habits we must think of habits as liturgies. A *liturgy* is a pattern of words or actions repeated regularly as a way of worship. I'm not only talking about what we sing or say at church; we worship anything by honoring and being devoted. Worship through liturgy involves our thoughts and our time and our lives. For example, I say the Lord's Prayer every night because I want the words of Jesus' prayer to sink down into my bones.

So do you see how similar liturgy is to habit? They're both something repeated over and over that influences who we are. The only difference is that a liturgy admits that it's an

act of worship. Our habits often obscure what we're really worshiping, but that doesn't mean we're not worshiping something. Because worship is often a reflection of our time and attention. And our habits reveal what we each believe is most worthy of our time and attention.

A LITURGY IS
A PATTERN
OF WORDS
OR ACTIONS
REPEATED
REGULARLY AS A
WAY OF WORSHIP.

So the question for us is: *What are we worshiping?*

When we combine the idea that our habits are liturgies of worship, along with the scientific insight that our brains aren't totally engaged when our habits are playing out, it explains how our unconscious habits form much more than our schedules—they form our hearts.

Take a look at the chart on the next page to see how this works in a daily routine.

All of these liturgies of wrong belief play a part in creating anxiety. And anxiety is a growing problem. Studies show that one out of three teenagers will experience an anxiety disorder. Between the pressure to succeed that many feel from parents and teachers, a world that often feels scary and out of control, and the demands of social media, it's hard not to feel anxious sometimes.⁴

But go back and look at the chart. Which one do you think is especially dangerous? It's the last one: the freedom liturgy.

We assume the good life comes from having the freedom to do whatever we want in each moment. But when we live out the “no-limits-none-ever” freedom liturgy, we actually miss out on the good life.

What if the good life comes not from having the ability to do what we want, but from having the ability to do what we

HABIT

LITURGY OF WRONG BELIEF

Wake up exhausted again, because I never get to bed on time.

My body will be fine. I can push harder than regular people. I am a god.

Check my texts and social media on my phone before getting out of bed.

I can miss a quiet time, but I can't miss what's happening. Unless I'm posting and getting followed, I'm not worth anything.

Grab fast food or dinner in my room, while everyone else in my family eats together.

Being too busy is normal. To be important, I need to stay busy.

Keep my phone on and within arm's reach at all times.

The most important thing is the most recent thing. The best way to love my neighbors is to stay updated on friends, school drama, and new memes, not to do focused work.

Even when the best word to describe life is "scattered" or "busy," resist any rules that restrict technology use and extracurricular activities.

To limit myself is to restrict my freedom. The good life comes from choosing to do what I want, when I want.

were made for? What if true freedom comes from choosing the right limits, not avoiding all limits?

As I look back on that night in the restaurant with my friends, it was a defining moment in my life, because I finally surrendered the keystone habit of freedom. I decided that following a framework of limits was a better way of life.

And that's when everything changed.

I had lived my whole life thinking that all limits ruin freedom—when all along it's the opposite: the right limits *create* freedom.

This wasn't an overnight realization. As my life began to change, I began to wonder why surrendering the freedom liturgy and accepting limitations was so hard for me. I began to wonder how I had come to believe such a bizarre definition of success and freedom. And I wondered if there were living examples of a better freedom.

I found the answer in the life of Jesus.

THINK ABOUT IT . . .

1. How have you seen your life grow out of control or in dangerous directions? How can a framework actually provide freedom and a pathway to personal success?

WHAT IF TRUE
FREEDOM COMES
FROM CHOOSING
THE RIGHT LIMITS,
NOT AVOIDING
ALL LIMITS?

2. Look at the liturgy of wrong belief chart. The author describes these as liturgies of worship to performance, rush, hurry, and anxiety. Describe what *liturgy* means in your own words based on the chart.

3. How can small, ordinary habits have big spiritual effects?

4. The author asks, “What if the good life comes not from having the ability to do what we want, but from having the ability to do what we were made for? What if true freedom comes from choosing the right limits, not avoiding all limits?” Do you agree? How can our pursuit of freedom trap us in dangerous patterns?

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